

LOCAL

Volunteers sought for Cranston cemetery cleanup as property control goes to special master

Cleanup group seeks volunteers for May 4 cemetery clearing



Wheeler Cowperthwaite

Providence Journal

Published 5:23 a.m. ET April 29, 2024 | Updated 2:35 p.m. ET April 29, 2024

CRANSTON – The 12-acre Oakland Cemetery on Broad Street, a perennial source of city consternation for its lack of upkeep, is now in the hands of a lawyer appointed by the city's Municipal Court who hopes to prepare the burial grounds for its next chapter.

The Municipal Court appointed John Dorsey as a special master to oversee the future of the cemetery. The property had been owned by Russell Dodd, of Foster, but is now under Dorsey's control after a long series of violations the city filed against it over its condition.

Dorsey is working with a group of volunteers who have been taking care of the cemetery since 2022 to figure out how to plan for its future, with hope of setting up a nonprofit agency by the end of the year to take care of the cemetery in perpetuity.

Group seeks volunteers for May 4 cleanup

Russell Farmer, pastor of Gateway Pentecostal Fellowship, has been working to clean up the cemetery since 2022 after approaching the city about volunteer opportunities. Together with a group of volunteers, he is planning a day for volunteers to come to the cemetery to clean it up, this Saturday, May 4, from 9 a.m. to noon.

That means picking up trash, whacking weeds, cleaning up debris, mowing grass and clearing buried gravestones. Farmer said he is hoping for 50 to 70 volunteers Saturday.

If you go on Saturday, May 4

What: Cleanup of the Oakland Cemetery in Cranston

Where: 1569 Broad St., **Cranston** (the cemetery is abutted in the rear by Roger Williams Park along F. C. Greene Memorial Boulevard)

When: 9 a.m. to noon, Saturday, May 4

What to bring: A rake, gloves, bottle of water

What to expect: This early in the year, cleanup will be focused mainly on cleaning up leaves, trash, winter debris

What will be provided: Water, trash bags, leaf bags

What's the long-term plan for the Oakland Cemetery?

At Christine DeMarco's house, across from the crumbling Roger Williams Park Mausoleum, Dorsey met with a steering committee trying to find a solution for the cemetery's condition.

Right now, his hope is for a nonprofit to be formed by the end of the year that would be responsible for the upkeep.

Dorsey's endorsement of a nonprofit foundation, with the caveat that any plan needs to be approved by a judge, is "music to our ears," Farmer said.

Farmer said the hope is to use a combination of volunteer labor and paid landscapers to maintain the cemetery. One portion of the cemetery that is largely Armenian graves is kept immaculate by volunteers of Armenian heritage.

"We're trying to get a permanent, long-term solution, so it never descends again into a grubby pit," Farmer said.

Safety is the biggest priority

Dorsey said his first priority is to arrange for demolition of the "caretaker's cottage," near Broad Street. The roof is caving in and the building is a safety hazard, an attractive nuisance for children looking for somewhere to explore or play.

City officials have been issuing violations to the cemetery for years. In 2021, Cranston Mayor Ken Hopkins sent in city workers and backhoes to remove trash covering multiple graves.

Cemetery owner sued Bank of America over fund mismanagement. What happened?

In 2021, the cemetery sued Bank of America, alleging mismanagement of the money in its trust account through the charging of exorbitant fees.

The trust, created in 1969, was intended for the perpetual care of the cemetery. Dorsey said he is looking to settle the lawsuit, with Bank of America relinquishing the money. While it would be possible to pursue a claim against the bank, it would also be costly, perhaps more costly than just walking away with the funds.

Dorsey said he plans to settle that 2021 lawsuit, with a judge's consent, and take the over \$300,000 in the fund and put it toward dealing with the biggest issues on the property, like the collapsing cottage, and then seeing what should be done with the remainder.

In February 2021, Dodd's attorney wrote in the lawsuit against Bank of America that there were 500 remaining gravesites, out of the 4,000 to 5,000 in the 12-acre plot and that it is nearing capacity.

The current number of plots left is unknown, but Dorsey said the remaining plots are likely to be sold on a case-by-case basis for family members looking to bury their loved ones near each other.

*Thanks to our subscribers, who help make this coverage possible. If you are not a subscriber, please consider supporting quality local journalism with a Providence Journal subscription. **Here's our latest offer.***

Reach reporter Wheeler Cowperthwaite at wcowperthwaite@providencejournal.com or follow him on Twitter @WheelerReporter.